

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 288 299

EC 200 770

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TITLE Failure To Learn To Read: Formulating a Policy Problem.
SPONS AGENCY Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [87]
GRANT G008630480
NOTE 48p.; Portions of the paper were originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citation Analysis; *Compensatory Education; Disadvantaged Youth; Economically Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Programs; Government Role; *Learning Disabilities; *Public Policy; *Reading Difficulties; Reading Failure; Remedial Programs; *Special Education; State Programs; *Student Placement

ABSTRACT

Various federal and state laws, regulations, and policies influence whether a low-achieving reader is categorized as "disadvantaged" or "disabled," and consequently what instructional interventions are provided. Low-achieving readers are being referred to special education at high rates while the number of eligible students served in compensatory reading programs for the economically disadvantaged is declining, though poverty among children has actually increased. Statistics using professional literature citations show a decline in interest in reading failure as an environmental deficit and an increase in organic impairment as an explanation. The government's view of its role in support of education has also changed focus, from a concern for equity to a concern for excellence. Many other factors are involved in the shift toward labelling low-achieving readers as "mildly handicapped" or "learning disabled" including: (1) the economically disadvantaged do not constitute a protected group under civil rights law as the handicapped do; (2) disabilities are defined so as to place children in better-funded special education programs; (3) the lower expectations allowed for special education programs are easier to meet compared to those of remedial reading programs. The need for a reformed policy on services to underachieving children is emphasized. Sixty references are appended. (JDD)

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FAILURE TO LEARN TO READ: FORMULATING A POLICY PROBLEM

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Portions of this paper were originally presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1985, Chicago. The author would like to thank Peter Johnston, Ted Youn, and Dick Allington for their responses to an earlier version of this paper. In addition, the author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of anonymous reviewers and editors in strengthening her argument. Support for preparation of this paper was provided, in part, by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (Grant #G0086-30480). The views expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the supporting agency and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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Abstract

The author argues that failure to learn to read is being reconceptualized as a problem of disability rather than disadvantage. The changing definition of failure to learn to read is reflected in student classification practices and in the topics of professional papers. The high referral rate of low-achieving readers to special education and the concomitant decline in numbers of eligible students served in compensatory reading programs are cited as evidence of a shift in how reading problems are perceived at the school level. Professional literature on the topic of disability has increased in inverse proportion to literature dealing with the disadvantaged, signaling a change in professional interest. The author describes the interaction between the professional media, government concern with equity issues, and the judicial and legislative requirements for eligibility for compensatory education and entitlement for special education. Funding formulas are discussed as fiscal incentives for one type of service over another. It is argued that all of these broader policy decisions shape a particular configuration of services for low-achieving readers at the school level. Thus, definitions of reading failure are described as embedded in policies that have emerged from a larger social and political context, a context that reading researchers need to be aware of and responsive to, if low-achieving children are to more fully benefit from advances in professional knowledge.

FAILURE TO LEARN TO READ: FORMULATING A POLICY PROBLEM

When I flunked I was scared to go back to School.

I flunked 1st and I fult werd because I thot eveal

dare wed call me nams....if I say they ignorant

they say lest I can read.

This child expected that he should and would learn to read in first grade. When he did not, the school's first response was to retain him. Still struggling with reading and becoming a behavior problem, the child was classified learning-disabled and placed in a special education class for emotionally disturbed students. Had compensatory education classes been available, such as Chapter I¹ reading, perhaps the child would have been assigned to one of those. With minor variations the above referral and classification scenario is played out with increasing regularity in schools today. To illustrate, one school district declared a moratorium on future referrals to special education because--had referrals been allowed to continue at the current rate--within three years all students in that district would have been labelled handicapped (Mann, 1986).

Clearly, special education is one way to provide resources to children who need them, but instruction in reading is not necessarily a component of these resources. For example, reading instruction in special education classes may consist of perceptual training activities that have not been positively related to achievement in reading (Leinhardt, Zigmond, & Cooley, 1981). Even

when reading instruction in special education classes seems appropriate, the instruction is neither qualitatively nor quantitatively superior to that of general classrooms (Haynes & Jenkins, 1986). Further, the goal of PL 94-142² is a "free and appropriate" education, but the judicial standard of appropriateness has not been clearly defined (Pullin & Murakami, 1987). In addition, the effectiveness of special education is not evaluated in terms of student achievement in basic skills. By contrast, data on student improvement in reading have been part of the national evaluations of Chapter I for over twenty years. The effectiveness of PL 94-142 is instead measured in terms of the number of children served, the number of certified personnel, and state and district level compliance with the technical procedures of referral, diagnosis and due process (U.S. Department of Education, 1985; Will, 1987).

Yet low achievement in reading is implicated in virtually all profiles of children in trouble: high school dropouts (Mann, 1986), pregnant teens (Edelman, 1987), and delinquent and homeless youth (Shaffer & Caton, 1984). To say that not learning to read limits life's possibilities, both personally and professionally, is to understate the problem (Johnston, 1985; Kozol, 1985). The absolute numbers of illiterates and the precise psychometric tasks that represent the current standard for literacy may be less important than recognition that large numbers of young people cannot read well enough to do what school and society require of them (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987). Reading failure is a problem that persists despite good intentions, a growing knowledge base in reading research, and over the past two decades, government intervention in the way of legislation and funding for compensatory and special education.

Aaron Wildavsky (1979), policy analyst and longtime observer of federal program development, claims that organizations basically want to be successful at what they do. When faced with a complex problem that they can not solve, they redefine the problem; if an objective can not be achieved, it is replaced by another, more tractable one. Outcomes may be measured by inputs and hard goals like increasing cognitive achievement among difficult-to-teach students are displaced by objectives that can be achieved, such as effort or money expended and compassion offered (Wildavsky, 1979). In the case of reading failure, I will argue that the problem is being redefined--from one of disadvantage to disability. Likewise, our responses to the problem are changing. These changes are reflected in classification practices at the school level and in the topics investigated by researchers.

Although research studies can and do influence how the educational community and the policy community perceive problems (Nelson, 1978), reading researchers tend to focus their inquiries at the child or classroom level, largely ignoring the broader social and political context of policy formulation. Such focus on the smaller units without looking at the broader picture may obscure "the extent to which educational practice at the classroom level is shaped and constrained by practice at other levels of the system" (Moore, Hyde, Blair, & Weitzman, 1981). In this discussion, I will describe how government concerns with equity, judicial and legislative entitlement and eligibility requirements for Chapter I and PL 94-142, and state funding formulas help to define reading failure and what we do about it.

Certainly, the role of the school is central in any discussion of reading failure. As Education Secretary Bennett recently proclaimed, "the elementary

school must assume as its sublime and most solemn responsibility the task of teaching every child to read" (1986). While the school in a generic sense may indeed be responsible for reading instruction, at the building or individual classroom level the different and conflicting labels and configuration of services may make it difficult to determine even which teacher is responsible for teaching reading to particular children with reading problems (Moore et al., 1981). In a study of the effects of student classification on children's opportunity to learn to read, Moore et al. (1981) suggest that teachers classify and refer children with reading problems based primarily on their assumption of where the child will be "better off," and often their decision may be only marginally related to the reading problem itself. Clearly, increasing numbers of children with reading problems are thought to be better off in special education, producing what Pugach (1986) calls a "truncated range of student performance in general classrooms" and institutionally sanctioned assumptions on the part of teachers about who is teachable and who is not. Teachers and other school personnel "make do" within the options available for children with reading problems, adapting to the organizational constraints that operate in a particular school (Moore et al., 1981; Pugach, 1986; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

While few would argue that bureaucratic politics and classroom practice interact to affect the delivery of reading instruction, the contribution of federal and state policies to this process has been largely underrated. In the following sections of this commentary I will describe a trend toward classifying low-achieving children learning-disabled rather than providing compensatory education services. I will also show how federal and state

policies have contributed to the multiplicity of labels and dual configuration of school services for children experiencing failure. Definitions of reading failure are also influenced by and reflected in the professional literature. Whether children with reading problems are called learning-disabled or disadvantaged, slow learners, remedial readers, or dyslexics, depends on professional affiliation, test sophistication and the historical era. None of these labels for reading failure have either rigorous and commonly accepted definitions or remedies. The professional literature, legislative mandate, judicial decree and the regulatory language of program operation have all worked to provide definitions--albeit frequently different--of reading failure, to which we, as educational practitioners and researchers, must respond.

Student Classification Practices and Enrollment Trends

Special education and compensatory education are separate and often conflicting classification and intervention systems that have evolved to serve an overlapping population of low-achieving readers. They are based on different assumptions about the etiology of the child's failure to learn to read, they became prominent on the public agenda at different points in history, and they derive their legal and fiscal statuses from different judicial and legislative decisions.

Nationally, the number of students classified as learning-disabled has increased by 119 percent during the past decade (U.S. Department of Education, 1984) whereas the number of disadvantaged students served in Chapter I compensatory programs has declined from 8.3 million in 1966 to 4.8 million in 1985, a decrease of 42 percent (Hartle & Bilson, 1986). There were no

children identified as learning disabled who were served by federal programs in 1966 but, in 1976, the first year that national data on services provided children identified as learning-disabled were available, about 800,000 were receiving services under PL 94-142. By 1983, this number had risen to over 1.8 million children. During this same time period, the number of disadvantaged children served under Chapter I had declined by 1.5 million. As illustrated in Figure 1, there was a substantial decrease in the number of students served by Chapter I from 1966 to 1976. However, from 1976 to 1983 the total number of low-achieving children receiving federally supported services remained relatively constant (between 6.2 and 6.5 million), but for 1.5 million students, we defined the source of the problem differently, shifting from a view of poverty or disadvantage to disability. It is interesting to note that during this same time period, poverty among children actually increased. In 1976 the proportion of children living in poor families was 16 percent, but in 1983 the number of disadvantaged students was estimated to be 30 percent (Levin, 1985). It would appear that failure to learn to read is being reconceptualized, and so its remedy is evolving from a notion of supplementing or supporting the classroom reading program to substituting what in theory at least is an educational program different from the normal classroom experience.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Reading Failure and the Professional Media

The professional and mass media reflect topics of interest as well as create interest in particular topics. In other words, the media reports on

issues that are important to the public and to the professions, yet the media can also alter or support the framework within which problems are perceived. How reading failure is defined and whether it is considered an important public issue is determined in large part by the professional and mass media. In a case study of the agenda-setting process, Nelson (1978) describes how the large number of problems the government potentially could address is reduced to the small number that it ultimately does address, and the role of labeling in this process. The particular issue that Nelson traces historically is child abuse, but the dimensions of agenda setting that are discussed in the course of her analysis have implications for any issue, including reading failure by whatever name, that should have a place on the public agenda.

Nelson proposes four stages: the recognition of an issue, its adoption, its prioritization, and its maintenance. In the first stage, an issue is noticed and action on that issue becomes possible. In the second stage, policy makers must come to believe that government is indeed responsible for action on the issue and that there is a right way to respond. Next, the public agenda is reordered to include the new issue, which may replace an older one. Finally, the new issue must become an "enduring concern of government" if any substantive actions are to be taken on the issue.

Although both the professional and mass media played important roles in government recognition of the problem of neglected and abused children, the article which "set the stage" was a professional one on the battered child syndrome. By attaching this label, researchers emphasized the medical aspects of the problem over the deviant aspects. When the government became interested in this problem, the label was changed to child abuse. The

importance of assigning the right label to a problem cannot be overstated. In this case, child abuse was deliberately chosen because it elicited the most consensus and the strongest emotions, even though child neglect was more widespread. That part of the problem with the highest valence--that receives the most uniformly consensual and affective response--should be emphasized at this stage. However, the responses to an issue may change over time and circumstances.

The analogue for the professional work that set the stage, but in this case for recognition of reading failure, was probably Rudolph Flesch's Why Johnny Can't Read (1955), listed in 70 Years of Best Sellers as a book that "made history and influenced American thinking" (Hackett, 1967), and fueled in 1967 by Jeanne Chall's Learning to Read: The Great Debate. It was also at this same time that the International Reading Association initiated the Reading Research Quarterly, the first journal to publish reading research exclusively. Major goals in establishing the Quarterly were to provide an outlet for reading research that had more "depth and detail" than was possible in other research journals and to provide a forum on the "status of reading research" (Clymer & Summers, 1965). Both these goals suggest that the Quarterly was introduced in response to high professional interest in reading research at this time. However, as we moved into the "Great Society" era, the "why Johnny can't read" slogan and the concomitant implication of instructional method gave way to the sixties notions of culturally disadvantaged reader. More recently, disadvantage has been upstaged by disability, used in the sense of an organically based, permanent impairment which inhibits or prevents learning to read.

Insert Figure 2 about here

An examination of selected professional literature in education written during the twenty years between 1965 and 1985 reveals striking trends in the attributes of underachievement in reading. By tallying the number of articles listed under particular Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) descriptors, it is possible to see at a glance which areas were salient to the profession and how these interests changed over time. As illustrated in Figure 2, the proportion of articles on underachievement in reading in which learning disabilities is the topic of interest has been steadily increasing. No papers on reading and learning disabilities were abstracted in ERIC in 1965, 38 documents were cited on this topic in 1970, 75 were cited in 1975, and 106 were abstracted in 1980 and 62 in 1985. For reading and the disadvantaged, the trend was the reverse. From 38 documents cited in 1965, papers on reading and the disadvantaged increased to 103 in 1970, declined to 55 documents in 1975, 31 documents in 1980, and only 11 in 1985. Obviously, this decrease is in inverse proportion to the increase in the citations for papers on learning disabilities.

An indication of the public's interest in reading and disadvantage or reading and learning disabilities may be suggested by compiling the number of articles published on these topics in the popular literature. A search of the Magazine Index for bibliographic references on these topics in articles published from 1966 to 1985 in several hundred general interest magazines was conducted.

When citations on reading and the disadvantaged are compared to the number of citations on reading and the learning disabled, the trend toward an increased interest in disability over disadvantage is not as pronounced as it is in the professional literature, mostly because there have been twice as many articles published on reading and learning disabilities than on reading and the disadvantaged in every time period sampled, even the earlier ones. However, change in the same direction is definitely indicated in the popular literature--toward even less interest in reading and disadvantage and increased interest in reading and learning disabilities. Fourteen articles were abstracted on reading and the disadvantaged from 1966-1970, but only one article was published on this topic during the next ten years. This decline in the public's interest in reading and disadvantage roughly co-occurs with a continuing decline in the number of Chapter I participants discussed earlier. Interest in reading and the disadvantaged resumed somewhat from 1981-1985 with nine articles cited. By contrast, interest in reading and learning disabilities increased from 30 citations in 1966-1970 to 49 articles during 1981-1985, the most recent time period sampled.

Once high-valence issues have been established on the policy agenda, these issues set precedents so that related problems may be addressed (Nelson, 1978). Groups with parallel problems may try to get their issues on the agenda, or the original problem may become more broadly defined to include related problems. Such a situation existed in the 1960s. The passage of Title I of the ESEA in 1965 made educational disadvantage a legitimate concern of the federal government and encouraged advocates to press for recognition of the educational problems of other groups of children. One of the major goals

of Title I was to improve the reading achievement of disadvantaged children. However, by assigning most reading failure to an etiology of environmental disadvantage, the various programs left few explanations for white middle-class children who failed to learn to read, except, perhaps, for low intelligence. Nevertheless, some white middle-class children still did not learn to read, and because there was no apparent environmental explanation available, the learning disability (LD) movement was born. To separate learning-disabled students from other reading-disabled learners the proponents of the concept of learning disability made it exclusionary, explicitly noting that reading failure due to language differences, low intelligence, economic or environmental disadvantage, poor school attendance, or other such factors was not classifiable as learning disability. Explicit in the definition is the attribution of learning disability to neurological dysfunction, though no test of such dysfunction is required for diagnosis (Coles, 1978).

Johnson and Morasky (1977) trace the disability orientation to reading failure from an inauspicious beginning to widespread acceptance of the term as being more appropriate than brain damaged, hyperkinetic, perceptually handicapped, or minimal brain dysfunctional. These terms were rejected, and the new label, learning disability, was selected, at a conference sponsored by a group of parents in Chicago in 1963. Before the meeting adjourned, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities had been established. This organization began publishing the Journal of Learning Disabilities in 1968. By 1980, several other journals devoted to this topic were being published, including Topics in Learning and Learning Disabilities, Learning Disabilities Quarterly, and Topics in Language Disorders.

Thus, two broad notions of reading failure evolved, one linked to environmental deficits, and the other to neurological dysfunction. These two broad categories today define the participants in two programs of extraordinary instructional services, administered by separate agencies at both federal and state levels. Research has followed the same path, with funding for investigations of reading failure also coming from different agencies (e.g., Office of Basic Skills vs. Bureau of Education of the Handicapped). Similarly, in teacher training and teacher certification separate faculties train remedial reading and learning disability teachers, who in turn earn different certifications or professional licenses to work with the differently labeled populations. In response to shifts in our definitions of reading failure, new journals started to publish studies of reading failure among the learning-disabled, and by 1980, these journals were publishing more reports on reading failure than were journals long associated exclusively with reading (Weintraub, Smith, Roser, & Kibby, 1981).

These trends approximate Nelson's trends in agenda setting. The issue of how well children are learning to read seems to occupy a secure place on the professional's agenda, judging by the steadily increasing number of publications concerned with this issue (Weintraub, et al., 1981). What does appear to have changed substantially is the nature of interest in the various attributes of school failure in general, and of reading failure in particular. Whereas twenty years ago we were interested in, and apparently optimistic about, compensating for disadvantage, the recent high rate of publication in learning disabilities may reflect more interest in organic impairment as an explanation for reading failure.

Shifts in the public and professional agendas are almost invariably related to shifts in political and governmental agendas. Such shifts are too rarely discussed publicly, and this seems especially true in the case of reading failure. There seems to have been a not-so-subtle shift in the policy agenda concerning reading failure and, consequently, a substantial shift in ideas about reading failure in schools. The movement from economic or cultural disadvantage as a primary cause of reading failure to organic impairment as a primary source seems real whether one examines publication rates, number of students served, or monies allocated. Understanding the nature of this shift seems central to clarifying our understanding of the history of reading failure. Governmental responses to this shift have been dramatic and have affected educational efforts in virtually every school district in the nation (Allington, 1986).

Governmental Influence

Recognition of the "reading problem" in this country is a relatively recent phenomenon, arising out of universal compulsory schooling in America. Although some evidence suggests that more people read better now than at any previous point in American history (Farr, 1977), concurrently evidence points to a supposed epidemic of reading failure (Copperman, 1978; Kozol, 1985) because significant numbers of school children do not attain an expected level of reading development (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987). However, government policies themselves have helped to define the parameters of the reading problem to which schools respond.

Government in a broad sense can and does influence understanding of a problem such as reading failure. For example, fiscal policies and civil

rights mandates tend to support some research and program prerogatives more than others and, in a direct way, influence what is done about any perceived problem.

On the one hand, in the United States, government services have expanded in periods like the sixties when social equity was a major goal (the "war on poverty"). Unlike the early entitlements of the thirties, which were designed to be insurance against the risks of unemployment, retirement, and other conditions of mainstream America, the programs of the sixties were designed to bring the poor and minorities into the educational and economic mainstream (Bailey, 1984). Compensatory education, particularly in reading, was seen as crucial to upgrading the school achievement of disadvantaged students and, ultimately, upgrading their status in American society. Thus, the federal government implemented various large-scale intervention programs (e.g., Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965) and supported a wide range of research efforts in an attempt to derive better techniques for teaching all children to read. These governmental actions produced a conception of reading failure based on disadvantage and, likewise, programs designed to address such failure.

When government allocates monies, proposes mandates, or develops other policy initiatives in response to perceived needs and constituent pressures, evaluation studies invariably follow to determine the impact of these policies (Allington, 1986). Early attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of Title I programs by relating inputs of money to outputs in terms of achievement test scores in reading consistently showed little or no improvement (Wildavsky, 1979). Later evaluation studies (Cooley, 1981) likewise reported that

increased time in compensatory programs did little to enhance the reading test scores of disadvantaged children. As several analysts have suggested (McLaughlin, 1975; Wildavsky, 1979), part of the problem in the early studies was inadequate data collection, so that the evaluators had difficulty determining whether the population met the definition of a Title I population, and whether the children identified had actually participated in a Title I program. The fact that there was only Title I money and little in the way of a program, and that Title I money was not always spent on Title I students, compounded the problem. As recently as 1980, it was reported in the Sustaining Effects Study that although reading achievement in Grades 1-3 now appears to have improved with Title I support, fewer than half of all eligible elementary children and only one percent of secondary students receive any Title I assistance (Carter, 1984).

On the other hand, in times of scarce resources--that is, when money is the issue--the policy question becomes not how to make programs work, but which ones can be eliminated (Bailey, 1984). In 1980, Title I barely escaped elimination when its supporters fended off an attempt to consolidate it with PL 94-142, a policy move that surely would have meant the redefinition of the reading failure of economically disadvantaged underachieving children since only those classified as handicapped (e.g., learning-disabled) are served under that law. Not only have federal funding policies become more conservative now than in previous decades, but the government view of what is important to support in education, of what is in the "national or federal interest," has also changed focus: from a concern for equity to a concern for excellence. The courts, and the regulatory language of law PL 94-142, have

also clearly restricted membership in "protected groups"--that is, the categories of students with special needs who are guaranteed equal opportunity to achieve equal education. In describing this substantive shift in federal interest from equity to excellence, Pincus (1984) divides the current conservative camps into the New Right and the centrist positions. The New Right would eliminate all federal funding of education, making such issues as equity local concerns. A more centrist position would continue to have the government promote equity, but on a much more limited basis. However, there are those who argue against abandoning any children who have difficulty in school, because "excellence without equity is both impractical and incompatible with the goals of a democratic society" (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985).

In proposing the Title I program, the U.S. government intervened in an attempt to produce more equitable educational opportunities for disadvantaged children and youth. Economic disadvantage was viewed as causally related to underachievement, as was the differential distribution of monies to fund educational services. The regulatory language of Title I required that students be economically disadvantaged before funds could be allocated to provide additional services to alleviate reading failure, thus adding disadvantage to the criterion of reading failure. In the case of Title I, then, governmental concern for equity of educational opportunity created a definition of reading failure that viewed economic disadvantage as central.

Judicial Rulings and Legislative Action

Variously described as equal opportunity, equal treatment, or equal outcome, educational equity is not held to a single standard (Brookover &

Lezotte, 1981). From the provision of minimal expenditures per child to equalized wealth or need, what constitutes equity depends on who is measuring it and the criteria applied. The criterion of access, or opportunity, is met when barriers to facilities and services are abolished; the criterion of participation means equal involvement in curricular and extra-curricular activities by all groups; and equity of outcomes requires that the average performance of advantaged and disadvantaged, minority and majority students should not differ.

Following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka in 1954, which clearly applied equal protection to education, making education available to all on equal terms, the Congress mandated a number of programs designed to help overcome educational disadvantage. Chief among these programs was, of course, Title I, which provided the funds and impetus for more academic support to economically disadvantaged students and for the "Right-to-Read" program. However, contrary to this popular slogan, a child has no recognized legal right to know how to read, only a societal mandate that he or she must.

Neither federal civil rights laws nor the various grant programs, of which ESEA of 1965 and ECIA of 1981 are a part, ensure equality of achievement even at a level of minimal competence in basic skills. Nor do these federal approaches ensure equal opportunity for all categories of students with special needs. As Silverstein (1981) explains, the civil rights laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or handicap, but do not ensure equal educational opportunity for poor or disadvantaged children. Education is considered equitable if the protected groups are given

the opportunity to obtain the same outcome that others are provided. Title I of ESEA, amended by Chapter I of the ECIA, and PL 94-142 are the two major grant programs designed to assist schools in providing equal opportunity to protected groups (Silverstein, 1981). The catch, insofar as compensatory services are concerned, is that those children with special needs who are eligible for compensatory education services under Chapter I--the educationally disadvantaged in low-income areas--do not constitute a protected group under civil rights law. That is, these students have no legal entitlement to demand extraordinary educational services. In contrast, the handicapped do constitute a protected group, and as such are entitled to special education services.

Of course, these federal grant programs are not intended to pay for the entire cost of special services; rather, state and local funds must be used to meet the civil rights obligation of providing a free and appropriate education to handicapped students. There is no such civil rights mandate to provide compensatory education to eligible poor students. At least in theory, all handicapped students are guaranteed special services as a basic legal right, whereas reading disabled "nonhandicapped" children are not. The number of low-achieving and economically disadvantaged students who receive compensatory education services--usually supplemental reading instruction--and the level of these services depends on the amount of money appropriated by Congress as well as on decisions by state and local education agencies on how and where to distribute the available monies.

Not only is there no measure of equal outcome or minimum achievement in basic skills such as reading as the test of equity today, but what does

constitute equal educational opportunity is determined by the status of the group to which the child is assigned (Silverstein, 1981). If the group is the handicapped, the child is entitled to free and appropriate special education services. If the group is the educationally and economically disadvantaged, the child is only eligible for compensatory educational services, which are provided to less than half of all eligible students. If the child is reading-disabled and enrolled in a school in an economically advantaged neighborhood, one which does not receive Chapter I monies, then that child has neither the eligibility for federally funded remedial reading nor any right to extraordinary instructional services--until, of course, the reading disability becomes severe enough to qualify as dyslexia, at which point the child can be considered learning-disabled and fall under the protection of PL 94-142. In short, should the reading disability be allowed to become severe, then the student may gain access to mandated special educational services.

Thus, as a result of various judicial and legislative actions, a reading-disabled child may fall into either of two broad classes of students with exceptional needs. Although these programs are not mutually exclusive, there is little overlap in participation in the two large intervention programs available to remedy reading failure (Birman, 1981). The availability of these two federal programs assumes that two distinct populations of underachieving students exist, populations whose reading difficulties have fundamentally different causes. Although identification and selection for participation in either program is designed to be objective, a number of unobjective factors actually influence who is selected for which program and, therefore, how the reading failure is defined.

Defining Failure and Eligibility for Categories

As already noted, a major problem with current federal approaches to reading disability and other types of school failure is the difficulty in distinguishing special needs populations served by PL 94-142 and Chapter I (as well as students eligible for instruction in other categories such as migrant, bilingual, etc.). As Silverstein (1981) points out, each civil rights law and grant program includes its own set of definitions, leaving the local districts to understand different sets of requirements which address the same children, often describing these children in the same or similar language.

From a school perspective, not only is the legal documentation which describes overlapping populations similar, but so are their academic problems. According to Birman (1981), approximately 25 percent of elementary school students are not adequately learning to read, write, or do math. These students may be identified as handicapped, or these same students may be eligible for compensatory education. The overlap in populations targeted for one program or the other arises because low reading achievement is most often the basis for identifying handicapping conditions, but low achievement is also more common among students who are poor than among the more economically advantaged.

Although special education and compensatory education programs both treat students who experience reading failure, these systems differ substantially in their origins and assumptions (Leinhardt, Bickel, & Pallay, 1982) about such failure. Compensatory education originated to counteract the supposed effects of poverty, based on that assumption students may be able to catch up if provided with extra reading support. On the other hand, special education is

based on a medical model of diagnosis of a particular disability--most often in reading--that requires a specialized treatment. By far the most popular category of disability is learning-disabled, even though that category was not recognized as a handicapping condition eligible for federal funds until 1975. Nationally, over forty percent of all handicapped students are now classified as learning-disabled (Gerber, 1984). Although the federal definition of specific learning disability is a "disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations," in practice, learning-disabled students are generally students who cannot read (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Epps, 1983).

Algozzine and Ysseldyke (1983) recently characterized the learning-disabled label as the "oversophistication of a concept." According to their data, no meaningful difference emerged between low achievers and students labeled learning-disabled on 49 psychometric measures. Furthermore, most classes for these mildly handicapped students focus on the same academic learning as compensatory education classes. However, one significant difference between being learning-disabled, or otherwise mildly handicapped, and being a remedial reader is in the area of expectations. Even though the learning-disabled label denotes a mild handicap, it carries with it expectations for lowered achievement and permanence. The compensatory reading program is based on the assumption that the student's failure is related to a lack of appropriate experiences, a social condition that may be overcome with compensatory programs (Leinhardt et al., 1982).

In a recent paper describing high school special education students, Bogdan (1982) pays a good deal of attention to the labels we assign. Bogdan claims that the social dimensions of illiteracy take precedent over psychometric or legal definitions. Whereas the majority of the students in Bogdan's study were labeled learning-disabled, these students began their school careers as disabled readers. An examination of the students' school records indicated that almost to a child, these learning disabled students were originally referred to special education because they were behind in reading. An early assumption was that with appropriate instruction, these students would be able to catch up. However, by the time these students were teenagers, they had been relabeled learning-disabled, and there was no longer any expectation that they would learn to read. Rather, the learning-disabled label enabled these students to negotiate the demands of high school and eventually to graduate with no firm expectation or requirement that they become literate. Although nonlabeled peers with similar levels of skill in reading would not be able to graduate, learning-disabled students could have the minimum competency tests read to them, and could acquire graduation credits by performing alternate tasks and class assignments. To avoid the stigma of being illiterate, these students accepted the label of being learning-disabled in order to be allowed to function socially in school--an environment completely closed to those who are only illiterate.

In order to be identified as learning-disabled under P.L. 94-142, school personnel must decide that the existing reading failure is not causally related to certain specified student characteristics, including economic disadvantage and low intelligence. The availability of both compensatory and

special education programs assumes that at least two groups of underachievers exist and, further, that we can reliably sort those students into separate categories based on the source of the reading problem (Birman, 1981). It assumes that once this is achieved, we can then design educational interventions appropriate for students in these separate categories. Unfortunately, although much regulatory language assumes such precision of assessment, we have little evidence that students can be so sorted, and even less that our psychometric traditions will lead to appropriately designed interventions (Rist & Harrell, 1982; Shepard, 1983). In addition, other sociopolitical factors, such as fiscal incentives in governmental policy, are powerful--if little-discussed--forces in identification decisions.

Fiscal Incentives and Definitions of Disability

Students with low achievement in basic skills, particularly reading, may be assigned to any of several programs, particularly Chapter I special education services. Whether or not a child is identified as handicapped depends as much on the operation of fiscal incentives as on any psychometric or social characteristic of the child. Although funding formulas should be neutral, and classification should be based on objective eligibility criteria, this is not likely to happen in the absence of such criteria and in the presence of strong funding incentives to label low-achieving students as mildly handicapped or learning disabled. Moreover, Nelson (1983) suggests that better diagnosis, definitions, and data are not enough to prevent the misclassification of large numbers of students unless funding systems are built to reflect those priorities.

According to an analysis by Hartman (1980), the amount of money transferred from state and federal sources is not specified in the fiscal formula itself, but is a product of all the policy decisions associated with the formula. Hartman provides a taxonomy of funding types and the potential fiscal incentives and disincentives for each formula type. Resource-based formulas reimburse the cost of resources such as teachers and aides; cost based formulas reimburse districts for a percentage of the excess cost generated by extra educational services, and child-based formulas give funds at some standard rate depending on the number and type of children served. Any formula which makes funding contingent on labeling a child as handicapped also promotes overclassification. Placement decisions should also be made irrespective of the levels of reimbursement but, as Hartman claims, the tendency will be to redefine disabilities in order to place children in better funded programs.

Currently, 20 states use resource-based formulas, 15 states use cost-based formulas, and 15 states use child-based formulas to fund special education (Moore, 1982). Although these funding formulas theoretically represent different criteria for allocating resources, in practice, the details of any formula can be manipulated to favor one type of service over another, according to the preferences of policymakers within particular states and the needs of local school districts.

Leppert and Routh (1980), for example, found that the high rate of referrals to part-time learning-disabilities and emotionally-disturbed classes in Florida was related to a weighting system that generated more money than was needed to conduct these programs. Over a two year period the enrollment

in learning-disabilities increased 164 percent and enrollment in emotionally-disturbed classes increased 176 percent. At the same time the total growth in the number of students served in special education was only 31 percent. Because Florida has an unusually accurate system of accounting for costs, Leppert and Routh were able to determine what percentage of the money generated by the funding formula was actually spent on these programs. When percentages over 100 were spent on program costs, the districts lost money--they had to make up the difference between the actual cost and state reimbursement with local money. However, with percentages below 100, districts were able to make money. As expected, the high growth programs were showing a "profit" with only 69 percent of the formula dollars generated by the learning-disabilities program being spent on that program and only 72 percent of the formula dollars generated by the emotionally-disturbed program being spent there. The excess reimbursement could then be spent for other programs, thus reducing the amount of local money needed to meet program costs. In the state of Utah, however, the previously high number of learning-disabled referrals declined after the weighting system in their child-based formula was changed (Leppert & Routh, 1980). Utah assigned an equal weight to all mildly-handicapped students, thus neutralizing what had previously been a fiscal incentive to classify children learning-disabled.

However, direct comparisons across states are not always possible because different states are at different points in the evolution of their policies for handicapped children, they appropriate different levels of aid for education, and they include details in their funding formulas that offset predictions about how the various funding categories should operate (Moore,

1982). Moreover, virtually no comparative research has been done on a state by state basis to substantiate the actual effects of funding formulas (Moore, 1982). Such research would be difficult to do since there is little indication of what special education programs actually cost, no consensus on which programs are most beneficial or "appropriate," and highly variable and subjective selection criteria for who is entitled to services (Moore, 1982).

After surveying the practices of six states selected to represent a wide range of implementation procedures, Birman (1981) reported on how two of these states assign services to students who may be eligible for both Chapter I and special education programs. Tennessee and California represent two extremes on a continuum of remedial services to students. On the one hand, in California, the majority of handicapped students also receive compensatory services, which were considered essential support for mainstreaming these students in regular classes. The federal funds received from Chapter I are virtually doubled by California's own compensatory funding system, so that no student who falls below a minimum level of reading ability is denied services. On the other hand, Tennessee, which provides no supplemental state funding for compensatory education, maintains a separate and distinct system for compensatory education and handicapped students who fall under the protection of PL 94-142. If a student has been labeled handicapped, that student is denied access to federally funded compensatory education programs (Birman, 1981).

In New York State, the program for Pupils with Special Educational Needs (PSEN) and Chapter I programs are the vehicles for providing state-mandated remediation to students who score below the state reference point in basic

skills (New York State Education Department, 1984). In New York State, Chapter I and PSEN money is allocated to school districts based on the number of children who are poor and who achieve low test scores. These funds are in addition to general operating aid provided by the state. However, this additional funding is not tied directly to the child, as is the funding for handicapped students, but is instead related to the proportion of students in a district who meet income or achievement eligibility requirements. For handicapped students, the mechanism for funding is child-based; the more students who are identified, the higher the state aid. Such aid is directly related to services for the child, who is entitled to--not just eligible for--a free and appropriate education. A low-achieving child who has been identified as handicapped would be counted toward PSEN and Chapter I monies as well as funding for the handicapped (Gaughan & Glasheen, 1980). In other words, New York State already provides some extra money for a child who can not read. If that child is also classified learning-disabled, more money is available for that child's program, thus providing financial incentives for district personnel to label him or her as handicapped--usually, it seems, as learning-disabled.

The number of students identified as learning-disabled in 1980 in New York State was 43,478. One year later, the State Plan listed the number at 116,105, and projected a 30 percent increase for the following year. Child count procedures in the Chapter I programs only provide numbers that may be double-counted if the child receives both compensatory reading and math, so that precise comparisons between these systems in New York State are not available (Legislative Commission on Expenditure Review, 1982). However, even

with more difficult test standards for reading and other basic skills, and increasing levels of poverty, within this state the absolute number of Chapter I participants continues to decline.

If state level policy on funding systems is contingent on the values and beliefs of policymakers within particular states about which types of services should be encouraged and how eligibility should be defined, at the school district level there is even greater variability in the implementation of state policy. McKay and Michie (1982) conducted a national survey of district practices to determine how districts select students who may be eligible for both Chapter I and PL 94-142. The majority of districts try to maintain the independence of both programs, referring students to either one program or the other and rarely providing handicapped students with compensatory services. Only two percent of the districts surveyed by McKay and Michie (1982) had any coordination or "planned division of labor for the two programs," even though the same students could be selected for either compensatory education or special education. The existence of one program did not appear to affect the availability of services provided by the other, but the availability of compensatory did affect the number of referrals for special education. When the programs were coordinated so that low-achieving students were provided compensatory services before they were referred for special education, the number of students requiring placement in special education was reduced (McKay & Michie, 1982). This result should not be surprising since Title I/Chapter I resources provide instruction in reading, and low-achievement in reading is the common characteristic of learning-disabled and disadvantaged students.

Recently, there has been increased recognition that the number of students diagnosed as having learning disabilities may be attributed to the extra funding states can get for every student who is identified as handicapped, to the decline in Chapter I money for compensatory reading and other basic skills, as well as to problems in misclassification (Foster, 1984). One strategy recommended by the Commission on the Financing of a Free and Appropriate Education for Special Needs Children was for school districts to try to accommodate students in regular education programs with remedial services before they referred the child to special education programs, a strategy that was effective, but seldom used in the districts surveyed by McKay and Michie (1982). The Commission further stated that the distinction between educationally disadvantaged students in the general population and those who are handicapped and entitled to special services under PL 94-142 is becoming more blurred (Foster, 1984). Students who are not identified as handicapped do not receive special education services. Districts then earn no added state funding for these pupils, even if special instructional services are offered. School officials seem to be identifying increasing numbers of educationally disadvantaged students as handicapped and placing them in special education programs in an attempt to recoup some of the excess costs associated with extra educational efforts needed to develop literacy skills.

Conclusion

Thus, the various state and federal policies, laws and regulations influence how a child who cannot read is categorized and which type of instructional intervention, if any, is provided. Children experiencing reading failure may be defined quite differently depending on which school

district they attend, in which state, and what financial constraints these are operating under.

Over the past two decades, the number of students enrolled in compensatory education has declined substantially. Currently, these programs serve less than one-half of the poor and low-achieving students who are eligible for these services. While poverty among children appears to be increasing (Levin, 1985), disadvantage is less frequently implicated in current discussions of low achievement. At the same time, the number of low-achieving children who are identified as mildly handicapped, particularly learning-disabled, continues to grow at a dramatic rate. Classifications of students as learning-disabled or as having other mild or "judgmental" handicaps do not appear related to objective criteria other than low achievement in reading (Birman, 1981). During the past decade, then, we have changed our labels for low reading achievement and our response to this problem.

Professional interest in learning disabilities has paralleled the rise in the number of students diagnosed with learning disability, as evidenced in rate of publication on this topic and in the appearance of new journals that address these and related issues. A concomitant decrease in the rate of publication of articles on reading and disadvantage has also occurred. Once a topic of considerable interest to reading researchers and regularly published in reading journals that themselves were established in the heyday of Title I, reading failure is now addressed far more frequently in special education journals.

Both compensatory and special education, although differing in their assumptions about the causes and the permanence of underachievement in

reading, nevertheless place the burden of the problem on the student. In the earlier and, some may argue, more benevolent concept of disadvantage associated with compensatory services, the child remains within the educational mainstream and is expected to "catch up" with supplemental instruction. In special education, by contrast, there are few who return to the educational mainstream. In either case, the blame for not being able to read is placed on the child, without examining the learning environment or encouraging educators to reflect on the teaching process itself as a source of difficulty (Pugach, 1986).

Locating blame with the child instead of with the instructional system is one of the conceptual issues recently raised by Madeleine Will (1986), the Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Related to this issue, according to Will, is the mistaken assumption that regular education has little to offer in the way of expertise in teaching children with learning problems, and a second mistaken assumption is that regular education bears no responsibility. For the future, Will proposes a partnership between classroom teachers, special education teachers, and compensatory teachers based on what she calls a "second-generation" concern for effectiveness and student outcomes, rather than the "first-generation" concern about eligibility and entitlements.

Because many of the problems that the entitlement and resource programs were designed to solve still exist, illiteracy among them, some researchers have called for a dismantling of the special education classification system and a radical restructuring of all categories and programs to eliminate present eligibility tests, funding systems, and "compartmentalized"

interventions (Leinhardt et al., 1982; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1984). However, it is not at the level of the classroom or even of the school that such reforms need to be initiated (Moore et al., 1981), but rather, at the higher levels of the social and political system.

Many advocacy groups, professional interest groups, and educational researchers have been actively participating in a dialogue for change. For example, the National Coalition of Advocates for Students and the National Association of School Psychologists (1986) jointly issued a position paper in which these groups argued for policy and funding waivers in order to pilot alternatives to the present programs. In a proposal entitled "Rights Without Labels," lawyers for the Advocacy Center for the Elderly and Disabled (1986) have suggested ways of providing effective services without compromising the hard-won rights of children. Based on the results of a descriptive study, "Student Classification and the Right to Read," researchers associated with Designs for Change (Moore et al., 1981) proposed a reform strategy to improve services to children that focuses on reading, an area they feel is important enough to unite diverse interests in support of a shared goal--the child's right to learn to read.

Finally, from measurement and classification issues to curriculum and teaching issues, the merits of the present systems for children at risk of failure have been regularly debated in the professional literature, primarily in special education journals, educational measurement and school psychology journals, and, increasingly, in the broader-based educational research and public policy journals. Given the fact that reading is central in any

discussion of children experiencing school failure, it is time for wider participation on the part of reading professionals in the reformulation of policy for services to underachieving children.

FC

In this paper Chapter I refers to programs funded under Chapter I of the Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1980 (ECIA). This legislation modified an early program with similar intent, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The original legislation (ESEA) and its descendant (ECIA) both provided federal funding to school districts based on the number of pupils in that district living in low-income homes. Programs funded under both acts primarily provided additional funds to support supplemental instruction in basic skills, particularly funds to support remedial reading programs. (See McLaughlin [1975] for a complete discussion of this legislation and resultant programs.)

² PL 94-142 refers to Public Law 94-142, the Education of Handicapped Children Act of 1975. While several other legislative acts preceded PL 94-142, this act codified the rights of all handicapped children and expanded on previous legislation by 1) providing for a required decision-making process regarding the provision of educational services for handicapped children, 2) establishing clear management and auditing procedures for special education programs, and 3) providing federal funding to assist states and school districts in providing special education services. This act requires special education students be educated in the "least restrictive environment," that each student have an "individual education plan" developed and requires parental collaboration in the special education decision-making process. (See Ysseldyke and Algozzine [1982] for a more complete discussion of PL 94-142.)

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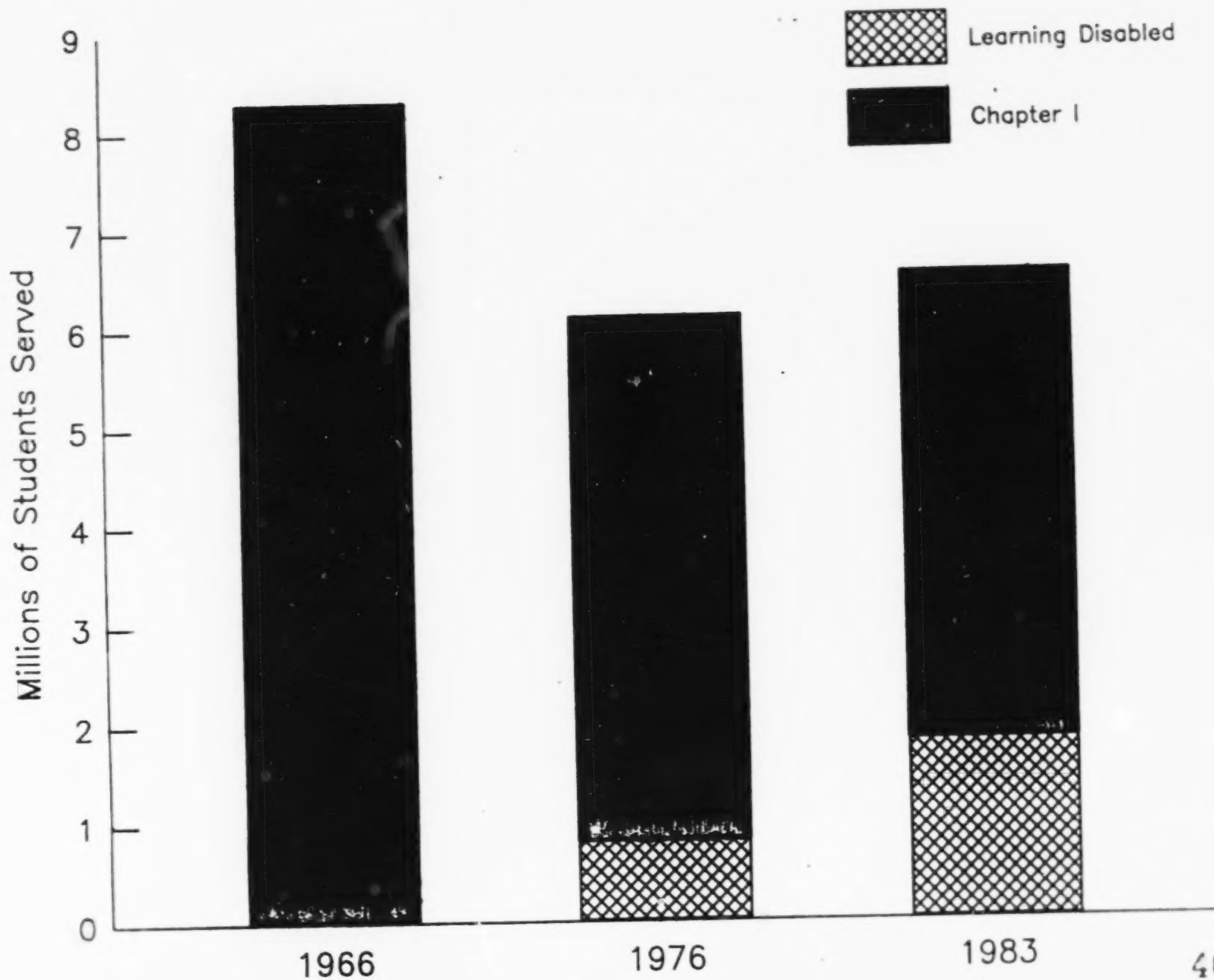
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Fig. 1: Numbers of students served under two federal programs.^a

^aThe Chapter I participant data are from Hartle and Bilson (1986); the data for learning disabled students are from U.S. Department of Education (1985). Note that data for learning disabled students are not available for 1966 since that category was not yet recognized as a handicapping condition.

Fig. 2: Proportion of professional papers with reading and disadvantaged or reading and learning disabilities as descriptors.^b

^b A computerized search of all ERIC documents was conducted for each of the years indicated on Figure 2. All entries with the descriptors Reading and Disadvantaged or Disadvantaged Youth were located and summed. All entries with the descriptors Reading and Learning Disabilities were also located and summed. The Figure illustrates the proportion of articles located for both searches by the two descriptor sets and by year.



1966

1976

1983

46

